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ABSTRACT

As two groups of teachers met to set up a HyperNews network for a grant project, it became clear that politics cannot be kept out of the classroom. In creating a community of diverse writers via HyperNews, six composition classes were linked for online discourse among departments: Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, Pan African Studies, and English participated in each group. Students may satisfy their composition requirements through any of these departments, and all composition teachers are accustomed to ethnically and racially diverse classes. This paper focuses on the group the author participated in as a freshman composition instructor. The paper relates how at planning meetings, the multicultural group chose only the texts no one objected to, and when writing prompts, the group members never ventured beyond their own "tribal interests." It states that the undiscussed subtext of the group meetings reflected their choices or lack thereof. The paper finds that the students' faceless, if not nameless, discourse in cyberspace succeeded in spite of the instructors' inability to forge such discourse among themselves. It suggests that, spoken or unspoken, individuals' cultural baggage and politics accompany them, rendering them "political" whether spoken or stifled. (NKA)

Pre-Creating the HyperNews Classroom Community: (Not)Speaking, (Not)Writing the Subtext

by Stephanie Satie

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, Colorado, March 14-17, 2001).

Maxine Hairston in her article, "Diversity, Ideology and Teaching Writing," argues against the politicization of the Composition classroom, claiming that this "new model places dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking and social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student." I would argue that whether one claims to be political or not, a "neutral" stance is always a lie; we inevitably privilege one binary over another. We cannot keep politics out of the classroom because everything is political, including ourselves, -- especially ourselves --as facilitators of burgeoning student writers. This became abundantly clear as two groups of six teachers met to set up a HyperNews network for a grant project sponsored by GTE.

In creating a community of diverse writers via HyperNews, we linked six composition classes (Developmental Writing and Freshman Composition) for on-line discourse between departments: Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, Pan African Studies and English, participated in each group. Students at our university may satisfy their composition requirements through any of these departments, and all composition teachers are accustomed to ethnically and racially diverse classes. I will now focus only on the group I participated in as a freshman composition instructor in the English Department.

Prior to creating this inter-departmental community, the teachers met twice, first to choose a textbook and again to choose six specific readings to post prompts for on HyperNews. Our problems surfaced even over textbook selection. One teacher arrived late, another came late and left early. All of the eligible texts were multicultural readers since we all embrace a multicultural perspective. Indeed, most of my colleagues and I have focused our own degrees around multicultural literature and postmodern methodology and critical perspectives. Yet, a strange reticence overtook the meeting -- an unspoken retreat to what Anna Deveare Smith calls "tribalism." We chose a text meekly by default, without even a joke to acknowledge its palpable existence among those of us facilitating a community of multicultural writers within and between our classes. No text that had been used and highly recommended was adapted. Only one that several eyeballed and "rather" liked and no one objected to, was chosen. (We didn't want to debate or stand up for anything too strongly; the text we ultimately "chose" seemed unchallenging, especially for a Freshman Composition class).

The second meeting we chose six essays and decided who would write which prompt. The team member who had been late and left

early the first time, did so again and also informed us that he required his students to respond to some, but not all six of the prompts because his syllabus was far too packed to accommodate all our project's guidelines. No one raised a murmur of dissent. We could of course teach any other essays in the text we liked, but for the HyperNews prompts we needed to choose six, require our students to respond on-line to all of them, and we needed to assign one member to write a prompt for each. But as ethnically diverse instructors, from different departments, we brought our own assumptions of "place" and right to "speak" to the selection process, never daring to venture beyond our own "tribal interests." This undiscussed subtext of our group meetings reflected our choices or lack thereof.

For the first time as a multiculturalist, I somehow understood that while I was accustomed to teaching all voices, I could not choose to write a prompt for essays by Toni Morrison, nor Gloria Naylor, nor Maxine Hong Kingston, nor Gloria Anzaldúa. Inwardly I bridled, yet knew I would say nothing. Actually, inwardly I was whining, "But Morrison's my favorite," and "I always teach Naylor." What could I bring to Morrison? Would anything I might bring be a defense of prejudices lurking deep within, or would I be too busy extolling Morrison to do service to her work and my students own efforts?

Because I am not a representative Latina, Chicana, African American or American, -- and I realize like a good postmodernist that no single voice can represent an entire culture or ethnicity -- does this disqualify me from posting, from "speaking" on an open forum on these texts, or from facilitating a prompt? And if it does, why?

At this juncture, I recalled an incident that resonated within my dilemma. One summer while on a scholarship at Dartmouth, a fellow classmate related a tale from academia. Her friend's father had been teaching African American literature at a prestigious Northeastern college. According to my classmate, this man was a wonderful instructor, hoping to earn tenure and even perhaps, chair the department. He was not African American. Then the department hired an African American man as chair who "couldn't possibly," according to my classmate, have known as much as her friend's father. I bridled at her assumptions and argued that the very nature of his being African American allowed him to bring an authenticity of experience her father's friend "could not possibly" bring to the classroom.

And here I found myself caught. Where was I in this discourse? Must I speak only on the Jewish American writer Grace Paley or Anzia Yezierska's memoir to which I bring my own ethnic "authenticity" and deeply lodged sense of Jewish self-loathing --

my own ethnic baggage -- and hence prove less sympathetic to Yezierska's plight than any one of my students? Could I choose to post on Linda Hogan's poem by default because Native Americans are not represented in our group? Finally I chose a problematical essay by Michael Novak exploring his own cultural struggle. The son of ultra conservative immigrant parents, -- his father, a working class Polish American, racist, homophobic, fearful of the liberal elite -- Novak finds himself torn between allegiances. Himself a product of a university education designed to turn him into the liberal his father fears, and whose sympathies lie with every minority except his own, Novak exists in a kind of self-tortured limbo. Are we only representative, ultimately of our own individual personal struggle?

I murmured some vaguely formed question to my group? My (uncommitted) murmurings dispersed unaddressed, the way our queries sometimes land on our students. Our predictable posting assignments continued uncontested.

Our students' faceless, if not nameless discourse in cyberspace succeeded in spite of our own inability to forge such discourse amongst ourselves. The notion of facilitating multicultural discourse for our students who are quite comfortable in that arena, by those of us piping meekly from our tribal

cocoons, remains a paradox. We sit in front of our computer screens so proud of our students who are finding their voices, breaking silences, as we retreat, unable to speak.

The paradox of exclusion under the umbrella of inclusion remained unexamined.

Spoken or unspoken, our cultural baggage and our politics -- whether assets or encumbrances -- accompany us, rendering us "political" whether we speak or stifle them. How can we urge our students to sing their lives, their ideas if we watch, self-gagged, in the wings. Perhaps their success implies another paradox: that they are not) as beaten down by academic strictures as we. Yet.

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